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In both China and the West, the literary quality of historical narratives has been fully recognized. In recent postmodern theories, however, the recognition of history as narrative is given a radical interpretation that challenges not only the truth-claim of historical narratives, but also the very distinction between fact and fiction, reality and textuality. By drawing on both Chinese and Western sources, this article revisits the debate on history and fictionality, and refutes both the extreme position of insisting on the objective truth of historical representation and the completely relativist view that denies history the possibility of representing reality. Given the influence of the postmodern theories, it is particularly important to acknowledge the difference between historical and literary narratives. History as narrative shares with literature elements of constructive imagination, but it ultimately depends on a core of facts verifiable by non-linguistic means. When we realize that the truth recovered from the past in historical writing is not final and absolute, but can be improved to approximate the true, we can both accept the truth-claim of historiography and subject that claim to further investigation and modification.

Keywords: History; Fictionality; Relativism; Postmodernism; Chinese historiography

The fact that the written record of history or historiography is a narrative account of past events has received much scholarly attention in humanistic studies, particularly as a result of the expansion of the domain of literary theory to other disciplines and fields. To understand the phenomenon in a broad perspective of twentieth-century development in the humanities, this

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may be seen as an inevitable step for scholars to move away from nineteenth-century biases of scientism and positivism, and from a rigid concept of objective truth as discovery of the impersonal laws of nature and society unadulterated by human subjectivity and imagination. History as what happened in the past and as a story about what happened—and here one thinks of the French word *histoire* that designates both history and story—seems to contain the tension from the very beginning between truth and imagination, objective account and subjective projection, reality and fiction. Indeed, in the early stages of the Western tradition, we already find two different models of historical writing in the works of Herodotus and Thucydides. The latter was obviously distancing himself from his predecessor when he set up a clear contrast between his austere but realistic history of past events and Herodotus' interesting and lively account which does not, as David Grene observes, make an effective distinction 'between the reality of verifiable truth and imaginative reality' (Herodotus 1987, p. 6). And that, in Thucydides' eyes, is more of a rhetorical exercise than a reliable historical record. 'My narrative,' says Thucydides, 'will seem less pleasing to some listeners because it lacks an element of fiction.' But pleasing fiction is not what he set out to write, as he goes on to say: 'My work was composed not as a prizewinning exercise in elocution, to be heard and then forgotten, but as a work of permanent value' (Thucydides 1998, p. 11). Thucydides seems to contrast his own history as written records with his predecessor's as oral history, a contrast of writing that preserves the past in permanent signs with speech that is as fleeting as sounds, heard for a moment, but gone and forgotten immediately after.

What is of permanent value in Greek thinking, however, may not favour the kind of history Thucydides claimed to write. In effect, it is not the record of historical actuality that matters, but what goes beyond the actual and the transitory to reveal something of a permanent and universal nature. Such a Greek emphasis on the eternal objects of knowledge constitutes what R. G. Collingwood called 'a rigorously anti-historical metaphysics' (Collingwood 1993, p. 20). It was philosophy against history, and in ancient Greece, philosophy won. The idea also comes out clearly in Aristotle's famous remark about the distinction between history and poetry that 'the former relates things that have happened, the latter things that may happen. For this reason poetry is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history; poetry tends to speak of universals, history of particulars' (Aristotle 1987, p. 12). Aristotle's philosophical defence of poetry offers an answer to Plato's attack on poetry as imitation not of reality but of the appearance of reality and therefore as 'concerned with the third remove from truth' (Plato 1963, p. 827). In the long apologetic

tradition of literary criticism, Aristotle's remark has often been cited as a powerful plea for the superior value of poetry over history, but the *Poetics* was not widely known in Europe in antiquity or medieval times, and it did not become the great classic in Western criticism until the latter half of the sixteenth century. 'The three books of *On Poets*, and the six or more books of *Homeric Problems* (presumably not in dialogue form),' as Stephen Halliwell observes, 'were in fact the two chief works in which Aristotle's ideas on poetry were disseminated in the ancient critical tradition; while the *Poetics*, originally produced for use within the philosophical school, never became at all readily available or widely known' (Halliwell 1989, p. 149). In any case, the distinction Aristotle made between poetry and history cannot be rigidly understood, because history also aims to recuperate what is generally applicable as a lesson or an insight from specific past events, to rescue historical knowledge as *epistémé* from whatever transitory *doxa* or opinions that came to pass at the time. If Thucydides meant to compose a work of permanent value, Herodotus' aim in writing his *History* was no less an attempt at permanency by saving what is valuable from the passing moments so that 'time may not draw the color from what man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds, manifested by both Greek and barbarians, fail of their report' (Herodotus 1987, p. 33).

This idea of writing against time is remarkably similar to what Sima Qian (145?–90? BCE), the great Chinese historian, considered as the purpose of historical writing. For a historian, Sima Qian says, 'no offense is greater than failing the sagely monarchs by neglecting to put their virtues and accomplishments in record, erasing the names of great heroes, illustrious families, and good officials by passing over their achievements in the narration, and letting the words of our ancestors fall into oblivion' (Sima Qian 1959, p. 3266). Thus writing in this sense becomes the best means to resist death and oblivion in view of the mortality of human life; history, like poetry, as W. B. Yeats put it so elegantly in 'Sailing to Byzantium', gathers all men and their past into 'the artifice of eternity', telling endless stories 'Of what is past, or passing, or to come'.

In the actual writing of history, both Herodotus and Thucydides used narrative techniques to represent what had fallen into the irretrievable abyss of the bygone past by preserving what happened and what was said in written records, which could always offer a contemporaneous experience in reading. Here I am referring to the concept of contemporaneity (*Gleichzeitigkeit*) as Hans-Georg Gadamer discussed in *Truth and Method* with reference to Kierkegaard's religious understanding of the idea. As a religious concept, contemporaneity designates the task of a believer 'to bring together two moments that are not concurrent, namely one's own

present and the redeeming act of Christ, and yet so totally to mediate them that the latter is experienced and taken seriously as present (and not as something in a distant past)' (Gadamer 1989, pp. 127–128). Gadamer develops this into an important hermeneutic concept of historical understanding; that is, understanding of a past event as 'being present'. For Gadamer contemporaneity specifically 'belongs to the being of the work of art', as he explains that the concept 'means that in its presentation this particular thing that presents itself to us achieves full presence, however remote its origin may be' (Gadamer 1989, p. 127). In that sense, the reading of history can be just as contemporaneous an experience as the experience of contemplating a work of art, because a good historical narrative may indeed present past events as though they were present, and in the 'contemporaneous' experience of that presentation, we do appreciate the aesthetic appeal of historical writing. In the West and in China, whether it is Herodotus or Thucydides, Sima Qian or Sima Guang, Gibbon or Trevelyan, great histories always appeal to us for their literary quality as well as their value as enduring records of the past, and their literary value has always been appreciated by generations of readers. History as literature is thus by no means a new discovery in contemporary theory, though the distinction between history and literature has always been maintained and never called into question in such a fundamental way until the recent development of postmodern theories.

Prior to the French Revolution, as Hayden White (1978, p. 123) observes, 'historiography was conventionally regarded as a literary art. More specifically, it was regarded as a branch of rhetoric and its "fictive" nature generally recognized.' In the nineteenth century, however, historians came 'to identify truth with fact and to regard fiction as the opposite of truth, hence as a hindrance to the understanding of reality rather than as a way of apprehending it'. Historians in the nineteenth century seemed to have accepted the Aristotelian distinction between history and poetry in a reverse order: 'History came to be set over against fiction, and especially the novel, as the representation of the "actual" to the representation of the "possible" or only "imaginable"' (White 1978, p. 123). But of course the historian uses the same kind of narrative techniques in writing history as the novelist does in fiction, and this simple fact undermines the clear-cut distinction between history and fiction. It is true, however, as Hayden White emphasized, that radical tendencies in contemporary critical theory have made it possible to reject the post-Romantic belief 'that fiction is the antithesis of fact (in the way that superstition or magic is the antithesis of science) or that we can relate facts to one another without the aid of some enabling and generically fictional matrix' (White 1978, p. 126). But as early as 1742, the German

scholar Johann Martin Chladenius already argued that our perceptions and conceptions of things are all determined by a particular 'viewpoint' and that when histories are 'related to us by someone who perceives them from another viewpoint, we do not believe that they actually took place and they appear therefore to be a fiction to us' (Chladenius 1990, p. 68). That is to say, if a historical narrative appears to be fantastically incredible, it may well be that the historical event has been conceived differently and interpreted from a different point of view. The actuality of the event itself, however, is not in doubt. Chladenius maintains that 'the event is one and the same, but the concept of it different and manifold. There is nothing contradictory in an event; the contradictions arise from the different conceptions of the same thing' (Chladenius 1990, p. 69). In an address to the Berlin Academy of Sciences in 1821, Wilhelm von Humboldt went much further. He argued that a historical event or 'what has taken place' is 'only partially visible in the world of the senses', so the historian must make up for the invisible part, for 'the remainder must be added through feeling, deduction, and conjecture' (Humboldt 1990, p. 105). The bare facts of what has happened, says Humboldt, offer only 'the skeleton of the event', nothing more than 'the necessary foundation for history, its material, but not history itself'. It is the task of the historian to find out 'the essential inner truth founded in the causal relationships', and in so doing, the historian, like the poet, 'must take the scattered pieces he has gathered into himself and work them into a whole' (Humboldt 1990, p. 106). Humboldt gives full credit to the role of imagination in historical writing and finds history and poetry comparable. 'Historical depiction, like artistic depiction,' says Humboldt, 'is an imitation of nature. The basis of each is the recognition of true shape, the discovery of the necessary, and the separation of the accidental' (Humboldt 1990, p. 109). Thus we may say that even in the nineteenth century, the literary quality of historical writing was fully recognized.

In our time, when positivism has lost its grip on our understanding of reality and the different ways we approach it, the rigid opposition between history and fiction collapses, and we become more appreciative of the power of representation in narrative fiction. In a way reminiscent of Humboldt's idea of history as the establishment of invisible causal links on the basis of 'the skeleton of the event', Daniel Aaron argues that since 'the historian writing from hindsight can never fill in the lost connections', it is necessary and important to make connections through creative imagination, which is what a novelist does best. Therefore, even though Gore Vidal's literary portrait of Lincoln may not satisfy a historian's strict definition of a reliable account, his Lincoln is more convincing as a historical figure in *Lincoln: A Novel* (1984) than the lifeless image recorded

in old archives. 'Hence truth is what is best imagined,' says Aaron, 'and the novelist is obviously better qualified than the historian to locate and reattach invisible historical links' (Aaron 1992, p. 56). The positivist 'custodians of history' may lay claim to historical actuality in their tedious 'clinical monographs', but novelists may actually give us a better sense of past history in their imaginative and fictional reconstructions (Aaron 1992, p. 62). Reflecting on the difficulties involved in gathering information for writing a historical account of the literary Left during the 1920s and 1930s, Aaron speaks of the 'treachery of recollection', the deliberate or unintended distortion of what actually happened in the 'recollections of people who have conscious or unconscious motives for selective remembering or forgetting, who are themselves parties to the events described, whose view of the past is blurred by ignorance, hostility, or sentimentality' (Aaron 1994, p. 12). If recent history is so difficult to grasp, it would only be a self-deception to believe that accounts of past history are all that reliable. So Aaron asks: 'how much history, whether written by contemporaries or by historians centuries later, has been the work of misinformed people relying upon incomplete data?' (Aaron 1994, p. 16). Nevertheless, the distinction between history and fiction is maintained, and Aaron concludes by reaffirming the usefulness of the historian's work for offering 'a reasonably accurate facsimile', in which history and fiction are not set apart as mutually exclusive, and the historian learns to participate in 'Henry James's delight in what he called "a palpable imaginable *visitable* past"' (Aaron 1994, p. 17). In contemporary scholarship in the West, many historians would not insist on the simple distinction between history as factual account and literature as fiction, but would see historical narrative as representation of reality in language and thus lending itself to the kind of literary analysis applicable to narrative fiction.

When we turn to a different tradition and look at the historical writings in China, we find that chronicles and biographies are combined from early on in the transmission of historical knowledge, in which accounts of actual events and fictional narration are closely intertwined. An early historical work is *Zuo zhuan* or *Zuo's Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (c. mid-fourth century BCE), which is one of three ancient commentaries on a yet earlier work, but the most literary of the three. The way speech is reported in *Zuo zhuan* is a particularly noteworthy literary technique. For example, an episode in the work tells the story of a man by the name of Jie Zhitui, who followed Duke Wen of the state of Jin for many years in exile. When the Duke returned to rule over Jin and rewarded his followers, Jie Zhitui thought none of them worthy of the reward, and decided to retire to a mountain and live the life of a recluse. He had a conversation with his

mother about the decision. She first urged him to claim his reward as everybody else did, but Jie Zhitui replied: 'I would err even more if I follow those whom I've blamed for their errors. Moreover, I have complained against them and refused to take any emoluments.' His mother said: 'Why not tell them and let them know then?' But he answered: 'Words are like the body's decorations. When the body is going to hide, why bother to decorate it? That would be too much like a show.' His mother then said: 'If you can do this, I am going with you in seclusion' (Zuoqiu Ming 1980, p. 1817). So they went into hiding and later died in the mountains. Another episode tells the story of Chu Ni, a warrior sent by Duke Ling of Jin to assassinate Zhao Dun, an honourable official who had offended the Duke by repeatedly giving advice too good for the wilful Duke to accept. This is what happened according to the narrative in *Zuo zhuan*:

> Chu Ni went very early in the morning and found the door to the bedchamber open and Zhao Dun already dressed in his official robe for presentation at the court. As it was too early to go, Zhao was sitting there, dozing off. Chu Ni stepped back and said with a deep sigh: 'He never forgets to respect his duties and office, and is indeed the lord of the people. To murder the lord of the people is disloyalty, but to give up my sovereign's orders is a breach of trust. I would rather die than doing either of these.' So he dashed his head into an ash tree and died.
>
> (Zuoqiu Ming 1980, p. 1867)

Now these may make very interesting readings with dramatic details, but the veracity of such reported speech has not gone unquestioned. The eminent modern scholar Qian Zhongshu cites several remarks made by past readers who have expressed doubts about the possibility of anyone eavesdropping on Jie Zhitui's conversation with his mother or overhearing Chu Ni's soliloquy before his suicide, but Qian considers such reported speech a legitimate construction in historical narratives and praises *Zuo zhuan* for its literary quality. 'In writing about real people and real events in hindsight,' he remarks, 'the historian often needs to feel vicariously what the historical figures felt and imagine how past events happened; he must put himself in the situation and enter the minds of others with sympathetic understanding so that what he writes makes good sense and bears sufficient credibility.' He points out that 'the recorded speech in *Zuo zhuan* is in fact imagined speech or speech on behalf of historical figures, which becomes, it is not too farfetched to say, the antecedent of dialogues or asides in novels and plays of later times.' This does not mean, however, that such imagined speech has no place in historical writing, and Qian quotes Quintilian and Hegel to support the view that literary and historical elements should not

be taken as opposed to one another: 'Quintilian in his *Institutio oratoria* praised Livy for making words in the speech always suit the person or the situation (*ita quae dicuntur omnia cum rebus tum personis accomodata sunt*), and Hegel in his *Philosophy of History* commended Thucydides for making speeches that were not alien to the historical speaker, even if those words were the historian's invention (*Wären nun solche Reden, wie z. B. die des Perikles... auch von Thukydides ausgearbeitet, so sind sie dem Perikles doch nicht fremd*)' (Qian 1986, p. 166). Indeed, even Thucydides constructed speeches in imagination, and he was fully aware of their constructedness. For the speech in his work, he readily admits that 'it has been difficult for me and for those who reported to me to remember exactly what was said. I have, therefore, written what I thought the speakers must have said given the situations they were in, while keeping as close as possible to the gist of what was actually said' (Thucydides 1998, p. 11). Some sinologists have argued that Chinese poetry is grounded in actual and particular historical circumstances, but Qian Zhongshu points out that it would be naïve and untenable 'to believe that poetry is all verifiable factual account while not to know the fictional embellishment in historical writing, or only to realize that poets use the same techniques as historians while not to understand the poetic quality of historiography' (Qian 1984, p. 363). Not only should we recognize the historical grounding of literary fiction, but we must also appreciate the literary value of good historical writing that can itself be read, to some extent and in some ways, as imaginative literature.

In addition to imaginative reported speech in history, there is also the matter of narrative structure of historical writing. When historians try to make sense of the seemingly random pile of data and discover some kind of 'inner truth', or when they try to draw some moral lesson from it, they must make choices and put their materials in perspective so that an intelligible pattern will appear. Herodotus thus draws this moral lesson from the fall of Troy when he says that 'as the Trojans perished in utter destruction, they might make this thing manifest to all the world: that for great wrongdoings, great also are the punishments from the gods' (Herodotus 1987, p. 181). In *Zuo zhuan*, the narrative clearly has a moral structure to supply historical lessons to the reader. As Ronald Egan observed long ago, the shape of the narrative is determined by its moralistic and didactic purpose. The actual battle between the states of Jin and Chu, for example, is very scantily described without giving the number of soldiers, their training, equipment or deployment, but more attention is given to preliminary matters that predetermine the outcome of the battle in moral terms. 'The emphasis throughout the narrative is on establishing the right and wrong of the situation and on distinguishing the just from the

selfish leader,' says Egan. 'Once this has been done, the outcome of the battle is predictable, and there is a noticeable lack of interest in depicting the main event' (Egan 1977, p. 335). In traditional parlance, this is known as 'indicating great meanings in few words' (*wei yan da yi*), supposedly characteristic of the Confucian classic of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. More recently, Anthony Yu also argues that traditional history in China always tries to provide a 'moral cause' for the explanation of any turn of events or change of situation, and that historical narratives always put events 'within the fold of an absolute moral order' (Yu 1997, p. 39). In *Zuo zhuan* in particular, says Yu, one can detect 'an attempt to weave a moral pattern wherein not only are the good and bad clearly distinguished but they are also "encouraged or censured (*cheng'e quanshan*)" accordingly' (Yu 1997, p. 40). In Chinese historiography as in many traditional Chinese novels, narratives clearly have a moral pattern and didactic interest, and the development of events seeks to reveal the causal links between men's words and deeds and their consequences. It is in this context that we may fully understand why Sima Guang's (1019–1086) monumental work of history is entitled *Zi zhi tongjian* or *The Comprehensive Mirror for Governance*. Insofar as it aims to offer an intelligible pattern and a moral lesson out of the random pile of information, history as narrative is structured like poetry or fiction, with a sense of poetic justice embedded in its movement from the beginning, through the middle, and towards a meaningful end.

In contemporary discussions, Hayden White is perhaps most influential in emphasizing the close parallel construction of historiography and the various literary forms, especially the novel. He calls it 'a fiction of the historian that the various states of affairs which he constitutes as the beginning, the middle, and the end of a course of development are all "actual" or "real" and that he has merely recorded "what happened" in the transition from the inaugural to the terminal phase,' because the movement from the beginning to the end are all 'inevitably poetic constructions, and as such, dependent upon the modality of the figurative language used to give them the aspect of coherence' (White 1978, p. 98). What should interest us, says White, is not the distinction of history as fact and poetry as fiction, but what he calls the 'fictions of factual representation'. Even if we acknowledge that novelists deal with imaginary events while historians deal with real ones, it is important to realize that 'the process of fusing events, whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the *object* of a representation is a poetic process. Here the historians must utilize precisely the same tropological strategies, the same modalities of representing relationships in words, that the poet or novelist uses' (White 1978, p. 125). In effect, White argues for reading history as literature.

All this is reasonable enough as we understand that historical narrative is also a kind of narrative, and that the coherence of meaning, if we seek meaning in history at all, is constructed in the context of a poetic or imaginative structure. But as I showed earlier, to recognize the literary quality of historiography is not really new; what is new and has become the specific impact of postmodern theory on the study of history is a radical reconceptualization of history as literature or as a form of textuality underpinned by a particular ideology. When Hayden White says: ‘What is at issue here is not, What are the facts? But rather, How are the facts to be described in order to sanction one mode of explaining them rather than another?’ we seem to see the pendulum swinging towards the other extreme (White 1978, p. 134). It is one thing to realize that a historian uses imagination and literary techniques in writing history, but it is quite another to erase the distinction completely between history and fiction, which creates a host of other problems the literary theorist is either unwilling to investigate or incapable of solving. In *Historical Representation*, F. R. Ankersmit draws an important distinction between literary theory and the philosophy of history. Without diminishing its contributions to the understanding of history, he discerns a serious problem in literary theory’s hidden agenda to promote a kind of philosophy of language detached from social and historical reality. ‘Unfortunately, in literary theory’s philosophy of language, reference and meaning are rarely more than a set of pathetic and ill-considered *obiter dicta*,’ says Ankersmit. ‘This has no disastrous consequences for literary theory’s aim to clarify literature, since truth and reference have no very prominent role to play there; but obviously this is not the case with historical writing, in which the weaknesses of literary theory as a philosophy of language may become a serious handicap, inviting historical theorists to cut through all the ties between historical narrative and what it is about’ (Ankersmit 2001, p. 21). For Ankersmit, ‘being about’ is the crucial factor of historical representation, distinct from the simple description of reality as ‘reference’ (Ankersmit 2001, p. 41), but the ‘aboutness’ of representation guarantees certain ties or connections with reality as the represented or what representation is all about. In such a formulation, the insights of a literary perspective are fully acknowledged on the level of ‘speaking about speaking’, in enquiring into the nature and complexity of historical representation, but the theorist does not lose sight of the question of ‘speaking’, i.e. ‘the level where the historian describes the past in terms of individual statements about historical events, states of affairs, causal links, etc.’ (Ankersmit 2001, pp. 41 – 42). The question of truth or truth-claims is thus important in thinking about historical representation; that is, whether a set of criteria exists to enable us to

discriminate between competing historical narratives and identify the one that is more reliable and credible than others as a representation true to historical reality. If there is no way to know what the facts are, or the question of facts becomes totally irrelevant, and if competing histories are nothing but different discursive constructions trying 'to sanction one mode of explaining them rather than another', then how can we make a judgement of their relative values and credibility? Without ways of assessing the degree of truth or truth-claims, on what legitimate ground can we uphold truth and condemn its falsification, and strive for social justice against injustice and deception in past history as well as in our own time?

But what is truth? the relativist-sceptic might ask with a sneer, and the relativist-cynic might add: What else but power domination? Ironically, the relativist often takes the position of the absolutist: either the absolute All or the absolute Nothing. 'First, an impossible demand is made, say, for unmediated presentness to reality as it is in itself or for an actual universal agreement about matters of value. Next, it is claimed that this demand cannot be met. Then, without any further ado,' as Martha Nussbaum argues persuasively, the relativist concludes 'that everything is up for grabs and there are no norms to give us guidance in matters of evaluation' (Nussbaum 1992, p. 209). But human knowledge and what we recognize as truth is never absolute in that sense, and the fact that we can and often do improve our knowledge and make it more precise, that learning and self-cultivation, or the German idea of *Bildung*, is an endless process to move us one step closer to an approximation of truth, to already locate our pursuit of knowledge somewhere in between the claim to absolute truth and the absolute denial of the possibility of truth. It is really a matter of basic human condition that our knowledge, like our very existence, is always *in medias res*.

With regard to history, the denial of distinction between truth and fiction leads to the total collapse of certitude, which depends on the basic concept of language's referentiality and the availability of truth, and without which it becomes impossible to differentiate between what is reasonably true and what is patently false. This is of course part of a general postmodern tendency towards seeing everything as signifier or text, the so-called 'linguistic turn' that holds language to be a closed system of signs, its meaning determined by and within that system rather than by any extra-linguistic reality. Ankersmit tries to differentiate the linguistic turn from literary theory and argues that 'the linguistic turn does not question truth in any way but exclusively the standard empiricist account of the distinction between empirical and analytical truth' (Ankersmit 2001, p. 36). But many other scholars understand the matter differently and find a

total evaporation of reality in the linguistic turn, in which, as Roger Chartier observes, 'reality is no longer to be thought of as an objective referent, exterior to discourse, because it is constituted by and within language' (Chartier 1997, p. 18). Against this view, Chartier maintains that all historians 'must take it into account that experience is not reducible to discourse, and all need to guard against unconstrained use of the category of the "text"—a term too often inappropriately applied to practices (ordinary or ritualized) whose tactics and procedures bear no resemblance to discursive strategies.' After all, discourse does not come out of nothing, but is itself socially determined. 'Discursive construction thus necessarily refers back to the objective social positions and properties external to discourse that characterize the various groups, communities, and classes making up the social world' (Chartier 1997, p. 20). Chartier specifically raises several questions to Hayden White, taking him to task for championing 'an absolute (and highly dangerous) relativism,' and for depriving history of 'all capacity to choose between the true and the false, to tell what happened, and to denounce falsifications and forgers' (Chartier 1997, p. 34). After all, White has to admit that there *is* such a thing as historical fact when confronted with the real issue of 'competing narratives' offered by the Nazi regime and the extermination of Jews and Gypsies. By reintroducing 'a thoroughly traditional conception of the attested, certain, and identifiable historical event; for instance, the existence of the gas chamber', White only falls into self-contradiction because, says Chartier, such a traditional concept of the historical fact is totally incompatible with White's overall perspective and theoretical position. 'How can one reconcile the evidence of the factual event with the quotation from Roland Barthes that White places in an epigraph to *The Content of the Form*: "Le fait n'a jamais qu'une existence linguistique"? And on what basis, starting from what operations, using what techniques, can the historian establish that reality of the fact or verify whether a historical discourse is faithful to the "factual record"?' By systematically ignoring the procedures proper to history, understood as a discipline of knowledge, says Chartier, 'White leaves us powerless to answer such questions' (Chartier 1997, p. 37). Perhaps White himself never meant to dichotomize reality and historical narrative as absolutely as those who pick up his ideas and push them to the extreme, but the dichotomous tendency is definitely there to be reckoned with in rethinking about history and representation. Despite all the sophisticated theoretical argument of the textuality or linguistic nature of all discourse, including historical narratives, history as past event has a claim on us that is not at all linguistic in nature. Moreover, the denial of historical truth may have other than linguistic motivations, as the denial of

the Holocaust shows. The denial of the Nanjing massacre by right-wing Japanese politicians and ideologues and the revision of Japanese textbooks of history may offer yet another example, which raises real questions about our present as inextricably linked with the past, and often flares up to create problems for Japan and its Asian neighbours, particularly Korea and China.

This leads us to another problem with the denial of the distinction between history and fiction; that is, the total neglect of the moral responsibility of historians to speak truth on behalf of those who cannot speak, to give voice to that which would otherwise remain forever silent. This is what Edith Wyschogrod calls the 'ethics of remembering'. Fully aware of the challenge by contemporary critical theories, Wyschogrod defines what she calls the 'heterological historian' as one caught between the promise to tell the truth on behalf of the dead and the philosophical *aporias* of the impossibility of re-presentation, facing 'the paradox that, on the one hand, there is no straightforward way to match our propositions about events with events themselves, yet, on the other hand, the historian is justified in claiming she can tell the truth' (Wyschogrod 1998, p. 3). She made a heroic effort to grapple with this paradox by negotiating a difficult position for her 'heterological historian' in dialogue with a number of philosophers—Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida—attacking the issue from many different aspects, disciplines and theoretical perspectives. For me, however, Lawrence Langer's words seem to speak more eloquently than theoretical abstractions about the issue of fact and fiction, narration, representation and historical truth. Langer interviewed many Holocaust survivors and collected their narratives from memory as testimonies, and the questions of truth and reliability arise as real issues. 'How credible can a reawakened memory be that tries to revive events so many decades after they occurred?' Langer asks. But the problem here, he argues, is not with the testimonies as reconstructed narratives, but with the way the question is framed. Langer continues:

> I think the terminology itself is at fault here. There is no need to revive what has never died. Moreover, though slumbering memories may crave reawakening, nothing is clearer in these narratives than that Holocaust memory is an insomniac faculty, whose mental eyes have never slept. In addition, since testimonies are human documents rather than merely historical ones, the troubled interaction between past and present achieves a gravity that surpasses the concern with accuracy. Factual errors do occur from time to time, as do simple lapses; but they seem trivial in comparison to the complex layers of memory that give birth to the versions of the self that we shall be studying in this volume.
>
> (Langer 1991, p. xv)

This is, I would argue, how we should look at historical narratives. History is not merely a collection of historical documents, but a narrative with a human factor that raises certain questions and, to the extent possible, provides answers. As human narratives, history may be prone to errors and lapses, not to mention ideological biases and spots of blindness, but, underneath all the layers of relations, descriptions and imagined dialogues or motivations, there is a core of verifiable facts as the basis of all the narration. This core of facts together with non-linguistic artefacts, relics and archaeological findings would form a firm ground for judging the veracity of historical narratives. Conceptual truth has a foundation in our perceptual beliefs, 'the beliefs that are directly caused by what we see and hear and otherwise sense,' as the philosopher Donald Davidson remarks. 'These I hold to be in the main true because their content is, in effect, determined by what typically causes them.' This is not just a simple or naïve conviction because, as Davidson continues to argue: 'Our concepts are ours, but that doesn't mean they don't truly, as well as usefully, describe an objective reality' (Davidson 1999, pp. 18 – 19). When we admit that whatever truth recovered from the past in historical writing is not final and absolute, but forms an approximation of truth and also part of the history to be studied, we may find it possible both to accept the truth-claim of historiography and to subject that claim to further investigation. At the same time, we may also find it possible to appreciate the literary quality of historical writing, the aesthetic appeal of its narratives, just as we may learn about truth in narrative fiction, in great novels and great works of poetry. Perhaps in this context, we may begin to understand Keats' famous lines in his great 'Ode on a Grecian Urn':

> 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,'—that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

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